

Grapevine Online Exclusive

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Web Exclusive: Fun and Fellowship —Marathon Style

Road-trip running buddies take a challenge to attend an AA meeting in six different states—all in one day!

Dawn still lurked two hours away on a cold, crisp day, as the cars eased into the Park and Ride near the local turnpike entrance. Eleven friends, some new, some old, were meeting to embark upon a day of AA fun and fellowship, marathon style. What this AA received that day was so much more.

Two months prior, myself and four of these same friends were on a six hour drive to Boston for the privilege of listening to four speakers share their experience, strength, and hope, as well as to have the world's best sloppy Joe's. Dubbed "the usual suspects" by yours truly, this band of friends, dedicated to sobriety and the carrying of the message of Alcoholics Anonymous, have been known to take on many interesting and challenging road trips, all in the name of



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“carrying the message.” I have grown to love these men, and what they have taught me. I am truly blessed.

As the miles rolled by that evening, I wondered, aloud, if it would be possible to do multiple meetings, in multiple states, in the same day. And if so, how many? I mean, here we were driving all day and all night just to attend one venue. My friends and I laughed about the idea, but the seed had been planted.

That seed was germinated and grew into a plan over the next six weeks. There was a time in my life when all ideas were hatched on a bar stool, and never went any further than that same stool. Gradually, as my drinking progressed, ideas and plans gave way to the next drink. Hope and possibility were no longer words in my active vocabulary. But sobriety had taught me, in these magical first two years, that anything was possible if you were willing to go to any lengths.

So I sat down with an atlas, meeting lists, and the Internet, and prepared myself to find that this was logistically impossible or would take too long to figure out. I was wrong on both counts. Not only was it possible in theory, but it could be done, and it took all of two hours to figure it out. Six meetings, six different states, one day!! The task was a challenge, but it came together. I was so excited I could barely contain myself as I called my friends and laid out what God had revealed to me. The excitement was returned ten-fold. They were immediately on board. One member wanted to leave immediately, but I reminded him we still had the holidays to survive.

The idea was cultivated by those friends, as we sought others who shared our enthusiasm. It did not take long at all. We decided to rent a fifteen-passenger van and make the trip in style and comfort. All told, 10 AA's and myself formed the team. The course was laid out; New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Maryland, West Virginia, and Virginia, in that order. What follows is our day.

6:45 a.m.—Franklinville, N.J. (Friends Gather Here Group)

Under a predawn sky we arrived at our first meeting. Held in a parish hall with worn wood floors, the first thing I noticed was the “No smoking or alcoholic beverages” sign hanging over the kitchen. It was good to know there would be no drinking here today. A look of surprise came over the face of the normal attendees as an energetic pack of eleven came through the door, one after another. As the Big Book meeting opened, we introduced ourselves and our mission for the day. After being greeted with warmth and

love, we launched into “Window of Opportunity,” that morning's reading. Faces lit up, and the excitement we carried for the trip became infectious. Additionally, something that would become the theme of the day became evident early on. God was, indeed, alive and well in the rooms of AA. The sharing was powerful and moving. We were wished well as the meeting ended, and we left with flyers for their upcoming 1st anniversary. We were home, even away from home.

9:58 a.m.—Wilmington, Del. (Growing and Learning Group)

Our arrival at meeting number two was delayed by our stop for a large, sit-down breakfast at the local restaurant. We waited patiently as they attempted to make seating arrangements for a boisterous sober group of eleven. We found everyone we met incredibly friendly, including a 93-year-old woman who told some our members we had made her day. Imagine an alcoholic being told anything like that in their active drinking?

We came through the doors of this meeting as it began, or had just begun. The door opened and closed eleven times as we squeezed ourselves into the room. Our purpose as a group was revealed and again those in attendance became charged with excitement. It was a discussion meeting and centered on the role of God and religion in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. The sharing included much about how members had rediscovered their religious affiliations in sobriety, once they discovered it was God, as they understand him, and not the God that had been dictated to them or misunderstood by them.

At the conclusion, we met new friends in brief fellowship before it became necessary to be on our way. Philadelphia was calling. As we were about to pull away, one new friend came up to the window of the van, face beaming and said how wonderful it was to be a part of this day and our visit. It is truly humbling to carry the message, and everyone in the van felt the power of this encounter.

1:00 p.m.—Philadelphia, Penn. (Mustard Seed Group)

A meeting in the middle of the city can be a challenge when you need to park a 15-passenger van. We scoured the area before we came upon a parking garage that could accept our vehicle. Disembarking we found a coffee house for a brief respite, and then the meeting a block or so away. We were well on our way to becoming caffeine dependent this day. The air was brisk, but so

far we had avoided the precipitation promised. The meeting was in a church, basement-level of course. We passed a soup kitchen on our way in.

The room was chilly initially, but as AA's flowed in, the air warmed. We met a woman who would be celebrating 44 years sober the next day and still attended a meeting a day. The Seventh Tradition was collected in a paper bag, which I found strangely appropriate. Many of the attendees were down-on-their-luck city folk, but their spirit was unwavering. God, again, became a topic of conversation.

As the meeting ended, a fellow, still somewhat intoxicated, reached out in desperation for help. We saw the statement of responsibility staring us in the face, as well as the opportunity to help one of the still sick and suffering. Three of our troop drove him to the local AA clubhouse, gave him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a soda. We did, however, compel him to relinquish the sixteen-ounce tall boy in his pocket. The remainder of our merry band began walking across the city. We were met by the van and our journey continued. The feeling of helping another alcoholic, even if just for the moment, just for today, is indescribably wonderful, and when shared with 10 other human beings, is a life-changing event.

5:00 p.m.—Baltimore, Md. (Road trip Group)

We arrived at our next destination filled with fast food and strength of spirit. The rain had begun to fall in earnest, but did not dampen our spirits. Those spirits would be tested a few minutes later, however, when we discovered the meeting was no longer held at this location. A friend from back home, who now lived in Maryland, had met us and we all felt a bump in our spiritual road.

That bump did not last long, and instead became an opportunity. Why not have a meeting anyway? There were plenty of alcoholics available, and we definitely had a desire to stop drinking. Additionally, we had plenty of Big Books and even a Grapevine, which supplied us with the Preamble. One of our members was chosen by group conscience to share her message, for what turned out to be her first time ever. The message resonated with hope, and became very emotional when the sharing began.

The building receptionist gave us permission to use the room and we had one of the most deeply moving meetings this alcoholic has ever attended. To be so far from our homes, and still be able to hold this meeting, was a gift from our Higher Power. We closed the meeting and gave our collection to the Samaritan who had allowed us safe haven.

8:00 p.m.—Charles Town, W.Va. (Joy of Living Beginners Group)

Winding and twisting roads, as well as a continued dose of bad weather, put us at our next meeting with minutes to spare (actually we were late by three minutes). We were all beginning to dislike the GPS system that insisted we take the wrong road time and time again. Our physical energy was beginning to wane somewhat, but the joy and enthusiasm for our mission trudged on. We were listening to speakers on CD between meetings, many of which provoked side-splitting laughs, followed by deep feelings of gratitude.

The group of beginners met us with friendship and love. They were amazed at the path we had taken to arrive at their small basement meeting. We read the Second Step as found in the Twelve and Twelve, followed by a speaker from out of town who shared her experience of that same step. We found bowls of candy placed throughout the meeting. Nothing like a little chocolate to get the energy flowing. Some our group shared, as had become customary throughout the day. As I listened to the flow of spiritual conversation, I was again reminded about how much this day was about God, and how he had shone like a beacon at every stop.

10:00 p.m.—Front Royal, Va. (Stepping Stones Clubhouse)

We really made haste as we attempted to get to the next meeting in time. Some confusion developed as we crossed the same set of railroad tracks three or four times in an attempt to leave town. But we were not to be denied. Something much bigger was at work today. It would have been easy for our fatigue to manifest itself into argument and irritability, but instead, it channeled into humor as well as some very loud snoring. We all could see the end was nearing, and moved forward with renewed resolve.

We found the clubhouse on a small side street. The sleet was coming down now at a steady pace, as we all made a run for the anonymously marked door. What we found on the other side was a small slice of AA heaven. A neatly kept clubhouse, including kitchen and playroom for kids, with walls adorned in AA memorabilia. It felt warmly inviting as I poured a much-welcomed cup of coffee. Adding to the effect was the fact it was a candlelight meeting.

Four fellow AAs sat around the table sharing their experience, strength, and hope with each other. Imagine the look on their faces as their meeting suddenly became bigger by eleven? As we once more explained our quest, smiles overtook their faces, including a gentleman who was celebrating his third day of sobriety. As we all sat at the table, weary but happy, I felt a

sudden surge of peace and serenity. We had made it. We had banded together and made our way across the highways and roads of the Eastern United States and done what we had set out to do. We snapped a group picture, bid farewell to our new friends, left a meeting list as we had done at each location, and made our exit.

The ride home was a long one, and the weather wrecked havoc on our journey. A few of our braver souls negotiated the roads, through the arduous conditions, and brought us home safely. At one point, stuck and sliding on a patch of black ice, our group members disembarked and pushed the van to safety.

The clock showed 5:45 a.m. as the van came to a final stop. We had been gone just over 24 hours, but in just one day's time so much had happened, and I will carry the memory of this trip for the rest of my life.

Soberly, with God in our hearts, we had spent a day carrying the message of Alcoholics Anonymous. We had learned much, about each other, but mostly about ourselves. I was blessed to be able to spend this day with my sponsor, and two men I sponsor. I met new and wonderful people at every turn of the road. Even now, as I write this, a week after our journey, I see so much more. I heard God mentioned with emphasis at every stop. I heard people share their sorrows, their joys, and their sobriety.

I will be eternally grateful to Alcoholics Anonymous for saving my life and helping me build a life. In this trip I found the spirit of the fellowship, the beauty of the program, and the love of my fellow man. Not bad for a 24-hour period of time.

-- Brian K.

Telford, Pennsylvania

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